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ABSTRACT

The role of the honors student on the urban, commuter campus is discussed with specific reference to the University of New Orleans. Prompted by a noted decline in the quality of the university's student body, an examination of the honor student population was conducted. Data were compiled from the ACT files and student records of all students who had received, over the last five years, the two institution-based scholarship awards that are judged solely on the basis of ACT scores and high school grades. The study investigated where the honors students came from, their persistence records, why they had chosen the University of New Orleans, why they may have left the university, and if they had fulfilled the university's expectations of them. It is suggested that the answers to these questions could influence recruiting procedures, major programs, the honors program, and scholarship programs. Results indicate the University of New Orleans has a body of superior students who are choosing academically demanding majors and living up to the university's expectations. A disproportionately large number of student withdrawals came from among science students and it is suggested that the business college is attracting large numbers of honor students to its majors at the expense of the other colleges. It is recommended that the arts, humanities, and social science areas participate as fully as possible in recruiting activities aimed at increasing their share of honors students. (Author/SF)

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A Question of Honors: the bright student on a Commuter Campus

by

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A QUESTION OF HONORS: THE BRIGHT STUDENT ON A COMMUTER CAMPUS

Since the word "elitist" became an unacceptable designation in academe some ten years ago very little interest has been evinced via publication concerning the honor student. A review of the literature of the past five years shows between 1 and 2 articles a year on the question of honors and 2-3 articles per year for the previous 5 years, whereas prior to that, the journals were brimming with pieces on honors and honor students mostly of the how-to-construct-an-honors-program variety. Although "elitist" may no longer have such purely negative connotations in educational circles now concerned with modeling their general-education requirements after Harvard's core curriculum, research on the bright student, the super-advantaged, has not increased accordingly. Yet most of us are suffering from a paucity of honor students in our institutions, and hear regularly from our faculties reminiscences over the golden age of academe when students were serious and "ever so much brighter than now." Whether or not there ever was a golden age, there are always good reasons to attract bright students into our programs. In reviewing the evolution of honors learning, C. Grey Austin outlined some reasons:

> Honors programs are central to the process of fine-tuning that is replacing the expansionist thrust of the sixties. Through the past decade, "access" was the key word in higher education; in the seventies the emphasis appears to be shifting to "quality." A well-developed and visible honors program contributes to the building of quality by attracting and retaining outstanding faculty members, by winning students of high academic ability, by enhancing the public image of the institution as a place that encourages superior scholarship, and, even in these times, by attracting funds.[1]

Although the faculty of the University of New Orleans had been concerned for years that grades were going up and quality down, their concern turned into alarm when data were recently published showing that over the last six years the percentage of entering freshmen with ACT scores over 27 had declined from 9% to 3%, a far lower percentage than the national average (10%) and the average for the state of Louisiana (6%). Conclusion: something had to be done. As part of an effort to devise a program to attract and retain bright students, the present study of our own scholarship students was undertaken. Knowing who they are, where they come from and why they chose UNO would suggest to us to what extent our recruiting priorities should be rearranged to emphasize recruitment of bright students. A second purpose was to find out whether or not we seem to be succeeding in the retention of those students we have, which majors are retaining them and which are not. A third objective was to test our method of selection for scholarship awards -- did the students whom we identified as potential honor students live up to our predictions?

The population for the study consisted of all students who first attended UNO as freshmen from fall, 1973, through fall, 1977, on either of the two University scholarships awarded each year on the basis of high school achievement alone. The interval was chosen to allow for at least one student generation to graduate. The office of student financial aid provided the student numbers of those scholarship recipients; the ACT file and the student's university record were the other sources of information. Data from these sources compared with available data on the total UNO student population for those years form the substance of this paper.

[1] Austin, C. Grey, "Honors Learning in the Seventies," Educational Record, vol. 56, no. 3, summer, 1975, p. 160.

The first objective of the study was to provide planning information to aid in the recruiting of students with potential as honor students. Several striking figures stood out immediately. Although our recruiting efforts are directed primarily at public high schools in the metropolitan area, and 61% of our total enrollment comes from the public sector, 81% of our honor students were from private high schools, with the three top "feeder" schools being Roman Catholic high schools. This preponderance of private-school students should not be unduly surprising in New Orleans, a city in which the public schools are often scored for their lack of effectiveness and a great majority of those families in the middle-income-and-above range, the traditional college-bound group, send their children to private schools.

A more surprising figure emerged concerning a recruitment program which the University has believed to be a very successful instrument, a summer program for gifted high school students in which they attend regular classes and get college credit. Social and recreational activities, tee shirts and the like have been thought to build an on-campus camaraderie sure to bring the youngster back as a full-time student. Only thirteen percent of the scholarship students in our study had participated in this program.

An important aspect of any recruitment program is information on how the institution is perceived by the college-bound community. In tabulating the data contained in the ACT files on proposed major, highest degree sought and reasons for choosing UNO, a picture began to emerge. The science areas are the field in which the largest number of students proposed to study - 20.4% - with allied health second at 14.6% and engineering third (13.6%). The business field, leader among our total student population, ran a poor fourth among the honor students. Their principal reason for choosing UNO was most often stated as "field of study" (by 43.3%). An additional part of the picture is seen in the fact that UNO was listed as first choice among colleges and universities by 57.4% of the honor students (compared to 53.6% of the total enrollment), giving us the image of a school recognized and chosen by superior students for its science programs. The picture differs from that painted by data on the total enrollment, in which business studies are consistently the proposed major field and sciences are rarely chosen.

A further set of information from the ACT files - the achievement scores - confirms the image of the institution as particularly attractive to science-oriented honor students: the modal score of the honors group in natural sciences was 30, in mathematics 28, but in English 23, only 5 points higher than the mode for the general enrollment. The verbally adept students are going elsewhere. These data suggest that if such areas as the arts, humanities and social sciences are to win their share of bright students, some additional efforts may have to be made.

Student Retention

As important as recruitment of honor students is, of course, their retention; perhaps more so, since one disgruntled student can discourage many who have not yet applied. What the University of New Orleans discovered about retention of its honor students and their progress toward a degree had both negative and positive aspects. Of the 333 honor students whose records were surveyed, 172 (53.4%) are currently enrolled. Of the 46.6% who have left, less than one-half have graduated, other reasons for leaving being categorized as transfers (14% of the loss), resignations (8.3%) and academic suspensions (3.8%); the enigmatic

"did not return" accounted for 31.2% of those no longer enrolled, revealing not only a problem with retention but also with our system of accounting for non-returning students. A substantial number of these may, of course, eventually return, as the "stopping-out" concept of education is particularly lively in commuter institutions. The transfers and resignations are matters for concern; however, there are indications that many transfers are due to students' misunderstandings about UNO degree programs: by far the largest number of transfers (8 of 22) were among students who declared allied health on their pre-college ACT form. UNO grants no allied health degrees. A more serious figure is listed among the "did not return": of the 46 who did not return, 15 or 32.6% had declared a future major in the sciences. Although the sciences were the most often declared major for the whole honors group, they account for only 20.4% of the whole. A disproportionate number of them, then, left the University, a problem which should be investigated.

These figures seem troublesome, since any loss of a talented student is problematic; however, of the 110 who entered the institution four years before the terminal date for the data of this study, 67 graduated, allowing us to suppose a graduation rate of 60.9%. This figure is far higher than the graduation rate of our total student population, estimated at 25%-30%. Retention of honor students through to graduation, then, seems good.

In view of ascertaining how well major programs are retaining the bright students who entered into them, we looked not only at graduation data, but also at the number of shifts of major the students made, from the proposed major on the pre-college ACT form, to the major declared upon first registration, to the first senior college major, the last senior college major and, finally, the major at graduation. Were these honor students single-minded in their pursuit of their declared educational goal? If not, then perhaps the institution should consider whether this is because certain programs are doing a better job than others in retaining their majors. Realizing that the declared major on the pre-college ACT form is often the product of an on-the-spot decision by a nervous high-schooler about to take an exam, it is not surprising that 55.9% of the declared majors changed by the time the student actually registered as a freshman. Between the first registration and entry into a senior college, only 23.7% changed majors, and between the first and the last senior college major, only 4.5% had changed. Overall, the largest number of honor students (42.4%) changed major once, and 35% did not change at all between the declared pre-college major and their current or last major.

The table below shows percentage of majors at each stage:

	ACT Proposed	1st UNO Registration	Senior Coll 1st	Senior Coll last	Graduation
Undecided	5.9	6.9	--	--	--
Business	12.4	17.2	28.7	29.5	30.9
Education	7.4	8.1	10	9.1	14.8
Engineering	13.6	16.3	16.3	15.9	7.3
Liberal Arts	10.2	11.4	7.9	9.5	8.8

(Table continued next page)

Table Continued

	ACT Proposed	1st UNO Registration	Senior Coll 1st	Senior Coll last	Graduation
Sciences	20.4	37.0*	23.2	21.7	22.1
Allied Health	14.6	3.0 (nursing only)	8.8	8.7	11.8**
Med-Dent-Pharm-Vet	11.1	(included in Sciences)	6.5	5.0	2.9***
Law	2.5	(included in Liberal Arts	(included in Liberal Arts)		(included in Liberal Arts)
Other	1.9	--	--	.4 (Genl Stud)	1.5 (Genl Stud)

* Includes all sciences and all health fields with the exception of nursing

** Medical Technology

*** A combined pre-med, pre-dent degree

The greatest percentage gains in honor-student majors were clearly made by the business areas. In fact, among individual majors, accounting captured 20.6% of the group that graduated, by far the largest percentage (medical technology was a distant second , with 11.8% and biology third, with 7.4% of the graduates). The business areas' largest jump occurred between the second and third stages, at which point some of the "undecideds" may have decided, and some of the liberal-arts majors may have decided on a more "practical" major. A surprising increase occurred as the percentage of education majors doubled, and a surprising decrease is evident as the engineering percentage was almost halved. These mysteries could perhaps be explained if the data had been broken down by sex -- did more women students than men persist through to graduation within the normal four years, as the National Longitudinal Study suggests is true nationwide? [2] If so, then the smaller percentage of engineering graduates (traditionally males) and the larger percentage of education graduates (traditionally females) might be explained.

The number of times that the students changed majors complements this picture: business students changed majors least - 76.9% of its pre-college declarations remain unchanged. Engineering students were second in their steadfastness, as 62.2% kept the same major. This suggests that the reason for the low percentage of engineering graduates does, indeed, lie in their taking longer than the normal time to graduate, and not in the fact that they left engineering for another major. Those areas in which students changed majors most often were allied health - 96.9% changed at least once. Given the fact that there are no degree programs at UNO in this area, this figure is hardly surprising. Liberal Arts students were second most likely to switch majors (76% changed at least once). Science students changed most often after allied health and liberal arts students; a total of 60.7% changed at least once. Since the percentage of majors claimed by the sciences fluctuated little over the four intervals studied, this figure suggests considerable movement among majors within the science area.

[2] Eckland, Bruce and Wisenbaker, Joseph, National Longitudinal Study: A capsule description of young adults four and one-half years after high school, National Center for Education Statistics, 1979, p.7.

There are several general observations that can be made from these data: 1) honor students are no less affected by the strong trend toward business studies than anyone else; this is reflected even in the fact that accounting is the most often chosen individual major; 2) students whose test scores show considerably more ability in math and science than in English skills are, predictably, choosing those majors which best fit their skills -- business, science and engineering -- with business the surprise winner as a field that many had not even thought about entering before college; 3) the liberal arts have been clearly unsuccessful in attracting these students as majors.

Student Performance

Although the criteria for the awarding of the two achievement-based scholarships, the recipients of which are the population of this study, are not particularly stringent (an ACT composite of at least 24 and at least a B high school average and ranking among the top 5%), its recipients have performed particularly well. In their first year, 62.1% made a 3.2 average or above, (on a scale of 4.0), with the largest number scoring 3.5 and 4.0 (25 students each); 3.9% fell below 2.0. Of the 265 who have grades at the senior-college level, 68.6% made a 3.2 average or above, and the largest number of them (29) achieved a 3.9 average; 3.4% fell below 2.0.

Of those who graduated (67), 8 received university honors at the cum laude level (3.76 - 3.859), 7 at the magna cum laude level (3.86 - 3.959), and 5 at the summa cum laude level (3.96 - 4.000). The University's modest investment in these students seems to be based on valid criteria and there would seem to be no need to alter the terms of the scholarship, renewable each year so long as the student keeps at least a 3.0 average.

Implications and Recommendations

The University very clearly has a body of superior students who are choosing academically demanding majors in accordance with their abilities. The graduation rate is high and scholarship students are living up to the University's expectations. A cause for concern for the College of Sciences might be that a disproportionately large number of resignations come from among science students. A cause for concern for all colleges except Business might be that this college is attracting large numbers of honor students to its majors, obviously at the expense of the other colleges. From the data presented, however, there is generally not great cause for alarm.

What the University has to offer these students in the way of an honors program should be scrutinized. There is no formal honors program to build esprit de corps and a sense of allegiance to the University. A single set of honors courses, interdisciplinary, yet administered by the College of Liberal Arts and with a strong liberal arts bent, has been strikingly unsuccessful at attracting the honor students of this study: of the 333 students over the five year period covered, four students have taken a total of seven of these courses. It is to be hoped that this study will at least effect a change in content of these courses to a more scientific-technological orientation combined with the humanities.

A final recommendation would suggest to the arts, humanities and social sciences areas that they participate as fully as possible in recruiting activities that would lead to increasing their share of honor students. Or haven't they heard? Students are no longer flocking to us; we must go out and ask them in.